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THE METHODIST FEDERATION FOR SOCIAL SERVICE

An organization which seeks to abolish the profit system in order to develop a classless society based upon the obligation of mutual service.

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COTTON PRODUCTION: ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF CAPITALIST DECLINE

The preceding Bulletin discussed the automobile industry as an example of capitalist decline. Another example is cotton production—in the agricultural field.

THE PLIGHT OF THE COTTON FARM WORKER

The typical method of cotton production in the United States is the sharecropper system. In 1930 there were in the ten southern states about a million and a half sharecroppers.

The Sharecropper. The ordinary sharecropper works "on halves." He owns nothing except perhaps a few sticks of furniture; possibly a few chickens or a cow. He furnishes nothing in the production of the crop but the labor of himself and his family. The landlord in return for the cropper's labor "furnishes" him—that is, assigns him a few acres of land and a shack; supplies him with a mule, tools, seeds, fertilizer, and with food or credit to buy food. For this there is often an interest charge of 10%, plus an additional service charge of 10%, upon the total of all advances, including food. But advances are usually but for part of a year—for instance, until the cotton is ginned. So the actual rate is much higher than the nominal rate. The landlord also usually furnishes oversight of the croppers' work through his agent the "riding boss."

Nature of the "Furnishing." The acreage supplied may be 20 or 30 acres. The size depends not on the amount one man can chop and pick in a season, but on the amount the combined family can do. A large family is an advantage. (One landlord remarked that he never rented a farm to a man who did not have at least 8 children and a wife who worked in the field "like a man." Another asked an industrious tenant to move because he had but one child.) The shack is often rickety, perhaps standing on stilts; unscreened even in swampy mosquito regions. The credit is by the acre (therefore less under the cotton reduction plan. See below). Often it is at the company store, where prices may be much higher than at independent stores. (Some prices in April, 1934, in an eastern Arkansas town in commissary and cash stores: 24 lbs. flour—commissary $1.05, cash store 95c; salt meat per pound—commissary 14c, cash 11c; 5 lbs. sugar—commissary 34c, cash 25c.) The typical food is fatback, meal, molasses, gravy made from lard and flour—a pellagra standard. A little garden may add to the diet, but the landlord often forbids gardening and the sharecropper system itself discourages it.

At the Year's End. The landlord's half of the crop is supposed to be rent for the use of his land and equipment; the cropper's half, return for his labor. The average cropper (with his family) produces about 6 bales and gets credit for 3 bales. At 12c a pound—the price around which cotton is now stabilized through government loan on stored cotton—he should get $180. But the contract is usually an oral one; the cropper may be illiterate; bookkeeping is often a fiction, or may be done, as the cropper says, with "a crooked pencil." Thus it often makes little difference to the cropper what the price of cotton is. The landlord may sell it all (or hold it off the market until conditions improve, while crediting the cropper at the season's lowest price) and deduct part or all of the cropper's half against what, according to his reckoning, is the debt to him. So Negro and white sharecroppers are held to the land and the landlord by debt.

The Day Laborer. In recent years many sharecroppers have been set adrift from their place on the soil. Some causes are: the depletion of the soil in the old south; the competition of the better-soil cotton areas of Texas and Oklahoma; foreclosures and

concentration of the land in the hands of banks and insurance companies; and now the New Deal cotton reduction program (see below). Many of these displaced croppers live precariously in abandoned cabins, barns, and improvised shelters. They may get occasional jobs by the day. Also increasingly the landlord hires his former croppers, or others, as day laborers instead. Often they are paid but 50c a day or less; and this may be in credit at the commissary store, and only in the cotton season. Thus they are still tied to the land—but without "furnish." The landlord can keep wages down because of the labor "surplus"—southern Negroes and whites, Negroes returning from the north, sometimes even unemployed whites from the north looking for jobs in the cotton fields.

A NEW DEAL—FOR PLANTATION OWNERS

The economic condition of the cotton workers (about 90% of all those affected) has grown steadily worse under the cotton acreage reduction program. The numerically small landlord class—southern plantation owners; also northern industrial corporations which own huge plantations—has reaped the benefits.

Cotton First. The New Deal cotton program was the Administration's first attempt to start recovery by creating scarcity. The Hoover administration talked about plowing under every third row of cotton. (Also it poured $160,000,000 into the pockets of the southern landlords by financing 2,000,000 bales of Farm Board cotton.) Roosevelt put into effect the voluntary acreage reduction program in 1933; renewed it in 1934 and again in 1935. When voluntary curtailment was not sufficient to raise prices to the desired level, the 1934 Bankhead law—named for the southern Senator who sponsored it—was enacted. It makes cotton reduction compulsory by providing that no more than 10,000,000 bales may be marketed.

The Administration's economic plan of acreage reduction is self-defeating. Under the profit system, when prices go up in one part of the world other parts begin to produce more. (It happened in rubber when Great Britain tried restriction. It happens more quickly in cotton.)

Landlords Like It. Many of the big plantation owners not knowing these facts are pleased with the immediate result. These were represented among the 4000 farmers who "marched" (in Pullman cars and automobiles) to Washington in mid-May to endorse the AAA. Among them were 172 landlords from Arkansas alone; and from Alabama at least one big plantation owner, whose sharecroppers, hundreds of them, have received no AAA parity payments. (Secretary Wallace and Administrator Davis have denied the widespread charge that the march was promoted by AAA agencies. The *Farmers National Weekly,* May 31, prints evidence that it was.) Such landlords say that the AAA program has helped, not hurt, the tenant farmer; that since cotton, which was 4¾c a pound in the spring of 1932, has risen to a level of between 11 and 12c, the tenant can make as much on 18 acres as he did before on 30 acres.

The Croppers' "Share." But credit is "furnished" by the acre—usually at $1 an acre. So on the above basis a cropper would get $18 instead of $30. Meantime prices of his necessities have risen sharply. The 1933 contract gave no specific guarantee to the tenant that he would get his share of the payments for acreage reduction. There were local committees who were to see that he was treated "right." But no sharecropper sat on them. There is much testimony as to what happened, including that of 97 Methodist preachers of the Upper Mississippi conference. These are typical: The preacher at Shuqualak, Miss., says that the landlord on a plantation with 200 cropper families, all members of his church, had these plow up their cotton. When the government sent the cotton checks the landlord held them. He told the croppers that they would have to have a trustee sign for them and get the checks cashed. But "they have not seen the money or the check." The preacher at Ittabena tells of two of his members who plowed up the allotted number of acres and got their government checks. But the landlord "made them give them up, also took their crops on so-called debts. He said the furnisher had first choice and the renter last, if any. None was left."

An Improvement? The 1934 contract guaranteed the cropper a specified share in the benefits. If he worked on a 50-50 basis, without tools or team of his own, he was allowed half a cent per pound for cotton not grown in 1934 as his share of the "parity payment" for acreage reduction. The owner was to receive the other half cent and all of the "rent," 3½c a pound, for acreage taken out of production altogether. (This unequal division was the price paid to get the landlord to accept the contract.) The croppers call their share the "poverty payment." A former member of the AAA legal staff says that under this contract "the landlord has everything to gain and the cropper everything to lose." Secretary Wallace has announced that in 1935 rental payments are to be diminished and parity payments increased. But, as it turns out, the more favorable the term of the contract seems to be to the croppers the more apt are the landlords to replace these with day laborers. That tendency, noted above, has been greatly hastened by the New Deal.

Wholesale Displacement. Section 7 of the 1934 Contract seemed designed to protect the cropper against such displacement. It called for: acreage reduction ratably among tenants; maintaining the same number of employees on the farm; protection of

these in the occupancy of their home, rent free, for 1934 and 1935, etc. But the wording of the section leaves loopholes—"endeavor in good faith," "insofar as possible" (who is to be the judge?), "as nearly ratably as practicable" (so the poorer tract may be left out of cultivation—and the tenant on it left with no crop), "unless such tenant shall . . . become a nuisance" (by organizing or joining a union?). Not only need the landlord not renew the contract with croppers at the end of the year; he has power, as they say, to "send them down the road." (The Arkansas Supreme Court has upheld the right of eviction.) Moreover, the AAA has interpreted the point about keeping the normal number of tenants on the farm to mean not necessarily the same tenants. So sharecroppers are being dispossessed wholesale.

Croppers Organize. Now sharecroppers and tenants are forming unions. Last year Negroes and whites in Arkansas organized the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. It is now in process of forming a united front with the earlier Sharecroppers Union organized in Alabama in 1931, with branches now in several states. Each of the unions claims several thousand members. The locals of the latter meet secretly, sometimes converting themselves quickly into religious meetings to avoid detection. Both unions were among the 50 Negro organizations—right and left wing, religious, social, professional, labor—which have just met at Howard University to do something about the plight of the Negro in the crisis. Representatives of both picketed the AAA in Washington while the Pullman car farmers praised the AAA program.

Terror. The plantation owners have been back of an organized reign of terror by night riders and county officials against the Arkansas union members. Union meetings have been broken up by mobs; leaders, including some Negro preachers, have been beaten, arrested, held in jail for days without trial; the home of a union officer has been riddled with bullets while his family was inside; an armed band of vigilantes shot into a Negro church; another one attacked a large group of men, women and children returning from church. Ward Rodgers, Methodist preacher, FERA teacher and militant friend of sharecroppers, was arrested and convicted on the charge of "anarchy." Outside sympathizers who came to help the croppers—members of the staff of Commonwealth College, the noted English woman, Jennie Lee, Norman Thomas, and others—have experienced the terror in various severe forms. The older union has been subjected to terror from the first. There have been several deaths, many arrests, some long prison sentences. During the past month there have been six kidnappings and beatings near Birmingham. A Negro labor leader was carried off, stripped, lashed into unconsciousness.

"Adjustments." The Administration's answer to sharecropper complaints is "investigation" and "adjustments." Last year Secretary Wallace sent Professor Calvin Hoover, of Duke University, to see what the program was doing to the southern tenant farmer. He reported: that the sharecropper has received a much smaller percentage of the increase in cash income than the landowner; that his income has "increased somewhat," if the provisions of the contract "are actually followed"; that the reduction program has operated "to create a motive for reducing the number of tenants on farms." An adjustment section of the AAA has been set up to meet complaints about reduction. On the basis of its investigations, often extremely superficial, the AAA has released big checks to landlords. The AAA also set up a Committee on Contract Violations. Hundreds of complaints have accumulated in its files.

Relief for Refugees. Finally the AAA sent Mrs. Mary Connor Myers, of its legal section, to Arkansas to investigate alleged contract violations. She has made her report. Now the AAA refuses to release it. But bits of its descriptions got into the press: hovels crowded until there was "standing room only," where neighbors took in displaced neighbors; evicted tenant-farmer families straggling along highways with no place to go; "like those of refugees fleeing wartime Belgium." The breakdown of the furnishing system is throwing a big burden on relief. The FERA ruled "to exclude from relief any tenants who have a legitimate claim upon their landlord for support. . . ." But it cannot force the landlords to carry the obligation. So it carries a new load. The bureau in Memphis, for instance, had on its roll on April 1st 541 Arkansas families, most of them farm families looking for city work.

SUBSISTENCE FARMING

But President Roosevelt said last February, "The Federal government must and shall quit this business of relief." So some other provision must be made for the displaced sharecroppers.

The Bankhead Bill. Senator Bankhead, with many of the southern landlords behind him as before, has introduced into Congress the Farm Tenants Home Corporation bill. It provides for $1,000,000,000 to be loaned to tenant farmers to purchase farms and equipment on a 30 to 50-year mortgage. Secretary Wallace endorses it as "a transition from tenantry back to land ownership." Some liberal, labor and church leaders are also endorsing it. It has been held up temporarily by opposition from sharecroppers, left-wing labor, and left-liberal groups. These point out: (1) that the landlord will see to it that the tracts the government buys are the poor ones—on which the cropper has not been able to get a living; (2) that the bill does not designate how much land each farmer may have (amendments now partly cover these two points); (3) that no provision is

made for new houses; (4) that no provision is made against Negro discrimination; (5) that under its terms crops raised are not to compete with commercial crops, that is, the cropper must be a truck farmer. But for this he has no skill or knowledge.

Its Meaning. In concrete terms, these critics say, the passage of the Bankhead bill will mean many poor little government-owned farms around the edges of the plantations. Former sharecroppers will live on in their rickety cabins; the government will "furnish" them and in return have a lien on their crops; they will forfeit all claim to relief; they will piece out their scant living by doing day labor for the plantation owner when he needs them, on his terms; if during the generation or more that they are paying for their land they attempt to organize and strike they may forfeit it. In a radio address Bankhead has shown what class he wants benefitted, ". . . There is a lot of farm land that is owned by banks, insurance companies, and what are called 'absentee landlords.' Most of this land is worked by tenants, and many of these landlords and owners are anxious to dispose of this land."

Rural Rehabilitation. The Bankhead bill provides for a great expansion of the Administration's subsistence farming program for "surplus" farmers, itself a development of President Roosevelt's—and Mrs. Roosevelt's—ideal of subsistence homesteads. The subsistence programs have now been transferred to the Resettlement Administration. This is to be administered by Rexford Tugwell, with $900,000,000 of the President's $4,000,000,000 work relief budget. (Recovery of land injured by drouth and other erosion is included.) The simplest and most common subsistence plan is the rehabilitation of the farmer where he is. Its wide use has been forced by the drouth. The general arrangement, carried out through state corporations with FERA finance, has been: buy the farm and leave the farmer on it; take him off the relief roll; equip him for an interim period with a horse or mule, a cow, a few chickens, feed, fertilizer; let him raise bare subsistence—but not commercial—crops; if he makes good let him stay on and contract to repay the government for the farm, on a long-term plan; (if he can't pay, let the government eventually foreclose).

Thus the attempt to preserve the profit system is leading to the abandonment of the American ideal of a progressive countryside sharing "the good life" with the modern urban community.

Capitalism in decline lets out industrial and rural workers alike. To the former the Administration which promised a New Deal offers work relief at subsistence wages; to the latter, subsistence farming. Both programs represent organized poverty.

Farmers at the recent Farmers Emergency Relief Conference at Sioux Falls, So. Dak., told each other, "We and the farmers back home whom we represent are the surplus farmers that they are talking about. . . . We are being invited in this polite way (by the offer of rehabilitation farms) to exist with no cash income." They added, *"Of course the idea of surplus farmers is absolute rot. We have the statement of the Dept. of Agriculture itself that far too little food is produced in the country to meet the diet requirements of the population."*

Sources. "Human Problems in Acreage Reduction," by Calvin Hoover; AAA and FERA releases; article by Ware and Powell in April *Harper's,* and by Powell and Cutler in February, 1934, *Harper's;* article by Amberson in the *Nation,* February 13th; article by MacDougal in April *Communist;* pamphlets by Erskine Caldwell and Norman Thomas; report of Amberson Committee on sharecroppers; series by Daniells in *New York Times;* study of terror in Arkansas by Jack Herling; Facts for Farmers; *Farmers National Weekly, New Republic, New Masses, Daily Worker, Federated Press;* personal correspondence and interviews.

TO OUR MEMBERS

Crisis Leaflets. The complete set of 18 Crisis Leaflets is at last available. Six deal with the breakdown of the profit system; six with the way out; six with strategy and tactics. We haven't money to send even sample copies to our members. The price: 2c each; 20c for the set; less in quantities. (Plus postage.) Some ways that they are being used: handed out as tracts and slipped into letters; mailed by preachers to parishioners; printed in church bulletins; displayed on church literature tables; studied as basis for discussion in youth and adult groups; sold at church conferences. They advertise themselves. Seeing one of them many persons have written in asking: "How can I get them all?" They are unique and are filling a need.

Finance. Our $1 memberships are not only holding up, but steadily increasing. This is partly due to the circulation of the Crisis Leaflets. People who see the Leaflets say, "What else do you publish?" Partly it is due to the wide publicity that some of our studies on the New Deal have received. Partly it is due to social service commissions and members who get new memberships. *But many of the $5 and $10 contributors have had to drop into the $1 class. This places us in a genuine plight. $1 memberships do not keep us going. How many of you can mail us an additional check or bill—by the 1st of July? This is a serious matter with us and we count on long-time friends—and new ones.*

A $1 membership brings this Bulletin once a month, except in July and August.